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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Evaluating a universal emotional-centred intervention to improve children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition

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**Abstract:** The transition from primary to secondary school is a critical period for children, which, for most children involves stress and anxiety [1]. If negotiated poorly, this transition can have a significant negative impact on children's short- and long-term well-being and mental health [2]. Despite this, efforts to improve children's emotional experiences of primary-secondary school transition are minimal in research and challenging to put into practice. Very few interventions focus on supporting children's emotional well-being and these are limited in number, sustainability, and reach. Talking about School Transition (TaST) is a universal, emotional-centred teacher-led support intervention to support transition, which was developed to fill this gap in the literature. The evaluation of TaST consisted of a longitudinal questionnaire-based design investigating the efficacy of TaST in improving 143 Year 6 (aged 10 and 11 year old) children's coping efficacy and adjustment over transition. It was assessed using the outcome variables: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries, in addition to a qualitative process evaluation. Results suggest that TaST had immediate positive implications for participating children who showed a significantly greater reduction in Transition Worries once at secondary school, compared to comparison group children. TaST has implications for educational practice and policy in elucidating the importance of supporting children's emotional well-being over this period and demonstrating the viability and success of implementing emotional-centred support intervention in practice.

**Keywords:** school transition, emotional well-being, intervention, longitudinal, primary school, secondary school

## 1 Introduction

The transition from primary to secondary school is acknowledged as the biggest discontinuity eleven-year-old children in the UK face within education [3], which 'too many' children find difficult [4]. During this time children navigate simultaneous changes in their academic, social, and physical school environment, often alongside biological changes associated with puberty [5]. Negotiating these multiple changes during a critical period in their development, can heavily draw on children's ability to cope. For some children these negative experiences are short-lived and primary-secondary school transition can have positive impacts on their well-being following a process of adaption (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019) [1]. However, for other children the transition can compromise their emotional well-being in the short and long term [2].

In the short term, leading up to and during initial primary-secondary school transition, many children report feelings of stress and anxiety [2]. Previous research has suggested that this is often due to a mismatch between the high levels of anxiety children experience during primary-secondary school transition and the limited emotional skills they can draw on to cope [3]. This was supported by findings from Bagnall et al.'s (2019) [6] UK focus group research, where children discussed the importance, but also difficulty in managing their emotions over primary-secondary school transition. Bagnall et al.'s (2021) [7, 8] case study research in the USA sheds further light on these findings, outlining how children's developmental readiness for school transition, which included being emotionally stable, mature and exhibiting good coping skills and self-advocacy, significantly shaped their adjustment to the new school environment following school transition.

Furthermore, research has shown that children who feel that they underestimated the importance of the socio-emotional aspects of the transition when in Year 6, or who exhibit vulnerability

factors, such as poor coping efficacy, experience a poorer transition to secondary school and report more problems settling in [1]. Lack of emotional-centred transition provision is not uncommon over primary-secondary school transition and can result in many children being insufficiently prepared for transfer challenges [9]. Thus, more needs to be done to support children's emotional well-being during this time. This is recognised by key stakeholders, for example, 45% of parents report that their child needed help talking about their feelings in preparation for the transition [10]. In addition, 21% of transfer children reported that their primary school did not adequately prepare them for secondary school in Evans *et al.*'s (2018) [11] review, and 15% of the sample later reported not settling well into secondary school. Primary-secondary school transition is also outlined as a period 'not handled well' within Government reports [4].

However, as shown by Jindal-Snape *et al.*'s (2020) [1] international review and White's (2020) [2] national review, programmes to support children's emotions over primary-secondary school transition are minimal. Instead, most research tends to focus on the practicalities of the transition and preparing children for the new ways of learning, and social changes [1]. This is despite research which has shown children's emotional well-being to be directly linked to their academic and social functioning [12]. As a result, this has created a partial picture of the support children may need to manage this period which neglects their emotional needs.

A further limitation across transition intervention research is that there is often little clarity regarding the theory underpinning the intervention. This can pertain to the overarching foci of the intervention [13], and the session content, which can go beyond and have unclear links with the theoretically informed programme approach. This was shown in Bloyce and Frederickson's (2012) [14] targeted intervention. Their overarching focus was on reducing anxiety and school concerns amongst children identified as vulnerable. However, their programme sessions focussed on general organisational, social and academic transition challenges, and little attention was placed on children's emotional well-being. Many interventions are broad and not tightly linked to a theoretical perspective, this leads to uncertainty around why certain interventions are successful and which components are key. This contributes to indiscriminate and uninformed strategies to improve primary-secondary school transition. Moreover, for practitioners implementing programmes, this can lead to uncertainty pertaining to which elements of interventions led to change, and can limit the efficacy and uptake of programmes. Thus, the theory informing TaST and key non-negotiable components, in addition to places where the intervention could be tailored to meet individual class' needs were clearly presented in the TaST lesson plans. Teachers delivering the programme also met with the researcher in order to go through the TaST materials to further clarify this. Furthermore, TaST session content was informed by prior research (Bagnall *et al.*, 2021; Bagnall *et al.*, 2019), in addition to Resilience Theory and change was assessed using clearly defined outcome measures, which also mapped onto this theoretical rationale.

There are also limitations in how intervention programmes are evaluated. For example, White (2020) [2] highlighted the lack of rigorous outcome evaluations of interventions undertaken in the UK which seek to support children's mental health and well-being over primary-secondary school transition. For example, many evaluations of programmes are small scale (in that samples are limited in number), use biased recruitment methods, comparison groups are non-equivalent [15], or they pay little attention to school differences, which limits the conclusions that can be drawn about what works. Longitudinal research is also limited [16], and instead researchers often employ single snapshot designs where data is collected before or immediately following the transition. This does not reflect the complexity of this period, especially the temporary 'honeymoon transition period' children may experience during initial transition, where anxieties are reduced in the short term as children perceive their new secondary school environment through rose-coloured glasses [17]. Thus, TaST was evaluated using a longitudinal design.

Furthermore, school-level pressures, such as academic and procedural demands including national assessments, heavy staff workloads and difficulty finding space within the overcrowded curriculum [10], can also contribute to reduced emphasis on primary-secondary school transition and children's emotional needs [18]. Lack of resources, both human and financial, can also be a key constraint, which adds to the marginalisation of emotional-centred support within schools during this time [19]. Thus, there is a need to design emotional-centred transition interventions that consider school systems and cultures, both in the methodology but also in the analysis. Thus, the present emotional-centred intervention was evaluated using outcome and process evaluation. The process evaluation enabled us to identify what worked well and what could be improved, to develop better practice.

In summary, at face value, there appears to be clear global literature investigating primary-secondary school transition, especially in the past ten years [2]. However, what is often neglected is that this research is limited in terms of: context, especially difficulties translating interventions

from one setting to another; content, in that few studies have investigated children's emotional well-being, and few interventions are theoretically informed. Recognising this, there are two main issues that need to be addressed. Firstly, there is need for interventions over primary-secondary school transition that have an explicit focus on children's emotions and how to manage them. Secondly, there is need to understand and measure potential change mechanisms, targeted through support intervention.

## 1.1 TaST overview and change mechanisms

TaST aims to narrow this research gap by being the first intervention that exclusively focusses on supporting children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition. Building on the theoretical limitations discussed above, TaST is informed by preliminary qualitative research conducted with transfer children, parents and teachers in the UK and USA in mainstream and special schools. TaST was also theoretically underpinned by Resilience Theory (Bagnall, 2020) [20]. Recognising that external protective factors, such as social support obtained from key stakeholders, and internal protective factors namely one's coping abilities, can shape children's response to transfer stressors [21], TaST aimed to improve children's adjustment over primary-secondary school transition, by encouraging children to draw on the support they can potentially receive from parents, teachers and classmates, and improve children's coping efficacy. Further discussion of the theoretical underpinnings and evidence supporting the design of TaST, in addition to a description of the content and structure of TaST is outlined in Bagnall (2020).

### TaST treatment

Following ethical approval and Head Teacher consent, TaST was delivered by Year 6 teachers over five-weeks of the summer term, on a weekly-basis. Each intervention lesson lasted approximately one hour, and consisted of individual, group and class-based activities. The lessons had three main foci:

- (1) Helping children to position the transition as a progression as opposed to a loss in order to support children's emotional well-being in the here and now at primary school.
- (2) Building children's coping skills (including their coping efficacy) to support children's emotional well-being looking forward to secondary school.
- (3) Emphasising the importance of social support, how this may change at secondary school, and how to cope with this to continue accessing social support to nurture children's short- and long-term emotional well-being.

The content, delivery and evaluation of TaST was informed by a thorough literature review, in addition to three preliminary research studies, see Bagnall (2020) [7]. Each session had a lesson plan script, accompanying PowerPoint presentation slides and each child worked from a transition workbook.

## 1.2 Rationale

Extending on the above limitations pertaining to how intervention programmes are assessed, to examine the effectiveness of TaST, the present study used a longitudinal quasi experimental mixed-methods follow-up design, where Year 6 children (aged 10-11 years) participating in TaST were compared to a comparison group. For the outcome quantitative evaluation, the outcome variables used to assess the efficacy of TaST include Emotional Symptoms and Peer Problems, Transition Worries and Coping Efficacy. These four outcome variables were assessed across three time points: Time One (T1) (pre intervention), Time Two (T2) (post intervention), Time Three (T3) (delayed follow up). It was hypothesised that:

- (1) Year 6 children (aged 10-11 years) in the intervention condition, would show a significant reduction in Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems and Transition Worries scores, and an increase in Coping Efficacy scores, in contrast to the comparison condition, from Time One (T1) to Time Two (T2).
- (2) This significant difference would be maintained following a delay of up to five months, at Time Three (T3).

Research has shown mixed findings regarding the role of children's gender and birth month in predicting adjustment [8] over primary-secondary school transition. As yet, the impact of gender and age on children's coping efficacy has not been examined over primary-secondary school transition. Thus, children's gender and age were also measured to assess whether adjustment, assessed in terms of: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems and Transition Worries, and Coping Efficacy scores varied depending on these factors.

For the process qualitative evaluation, Year 6 teachers delivering TaST were asked to complete a process evaluation feedback form, which contained five structural and process fidelity questions. To complement these assessments, at T2, Year 6 children participating in TaST were

also asked to complete four qualitative process evaluation questions to obtain detailed insight in identifying components of the intervention that were most critical in generating outcomes.

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Design

The longitudinal research project had a quasi-experimental mixed-methods, pre, post and delayed post follow up online survey design, investigating the efficacy of TaST in improving children's Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries scores. Children completed the online survey in T1 May 2019 (pre intervention), T2 in July 2019 (post intervention), and T3 (delayed follow up), which combines scores from September 2019 and December 2019, see rationale in the post-transition change analysis below. The same online survey was administered at each time point on Qualtrics, all items replicated.

The outcome evaluation has a 'mixed' design with a related factor - Time (T1, T2, T3 ) and unrelated factor - Treatment (intervention vs. comparison group). The process evaluation feedback enabled us to identify what worked well and what could be improved, to develop better practice.

### 2.2 Participants

See [Table 1](#) for a breakdown of participant numbers by gender and group (intervention vs. comparison) over time.

**Table 1** Participant numbers by gender and group (intervention vs. comparison) over time

Time and Group	Female ( <i>N</i> )	Male ( <i>N</i> )	Prefer not to say ( <i>N</i> )	Total ( <i>N</i> )
Time One (T1, pre intervention)				
Intervention	77	69	0	146
Comparison	74	85	4	163
Total	151	154	4	309
Time Two (T2, post intervention)				
Intervention	66	61	0	127
Comparison	49	52	2	103
Total	115	113	2	230
Time Three (T3, delayed transition)				
Intervention	45	56	0	101
Comparison	18	14	0	32
Total	63	70	0	133

At T1 and T2 Year 6 children, aged 10 and 11, from seven UK West Midlands primary schools participated in the research project (four schools participated in TaST and three were comparison group schools). At T3, Year 7 children, aged 11 and 12, from five UK West Midlands secondary schools participated in the research project. The primary schools were feeder schools to the secondary schools, and, where possible, participants were followed as they transitioned to secondary school. To recruit a representative sample, primary and secondary schools' demographic and performance Ofsted Reports and NCOP (National Collaborative Outreach Programme) statistics were reviewed and from this top, medium and low scoring primary and secondary schools were selected from one county in the West Midlands. Eight primary schools were initially approached, and seven agreed to take part; one school (within the comparison condition) had two Year 6 classes. Six secondary feeder schools were approached and five agreed to take part. Where possible schools were randomly allocated to an intervention or comparison group based on these demographic factors, e.g. one high, medium and low school within each condition. However, some schools did express a desire to receive the intervention and efforts were made to accommodate this. Nonetheless, we did ask Year 6 teachers at the participating primary schools what existing transition support measures were being carried out in the school and it was clear that these were well matched across intervention and comparison schools, e.g. all schools organised secondary school visits and provided children and parents with written and spoken information about secondary school.

### 2.3 Materials

The main body of the questionnaire consisted of five pre-existing scales.

#### 2.3.1 Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (*SDQ*)

The *SDQ* five item Emotional Symptoms and five item Peer Problems subscales were used. These are validated and widely used measures of children's well-being (Bloyce & Frederickson,

2012) with good factorial validity, internal reliability [13], and test-retest reliability shown after four to six months [22, 23]. Items were rated using the *SDQ* three-point rating system (0: not true, 1: somewhat true, 2: certainly true) and mean scores calculated (larger scores equating to greater problems). Some items needed reverse coding prior to analysis.

### 2.3.2 Coping Efficacy Scale

The *Coping Efficacy Scale* contains seven items which assess children's satisfaction in their handling of problems over the last month, and future problems, and has strong test-retest reliability and internal reliability [24]. Items were rated using the four-point Likert scale (1: Not at all satisfied, 2: A little satisfied, 3: Pretty well satisfied, 4: Very satisfied), and mean scores calculated (larger scores equating to greater levels of coping).

### 2.3.3 The Perceptions of Transition Survey

There is a dearth of standardized, robust and accessible quantitative measures to assess children's emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition in the UK. For example, amongst the limited pre-existing scales which have assessed 'transition concerns' or 'transition adjustment', these scales have key limitations including: lack of sensitivity, use of open-ended items which impose high literacy demands, design items with face validity specific for a particular study, rely on retrospective reports, or do not account for the longitudinal nature of primary-secondary school transition (Rice et al., 2011). Thus, in the present research the US *The Perceptions of Transition Survey* was used to measure children's perceptions of the organisational, academic and social aspects of High school. The 15 item 'worried about' sub-scale was used. Two items (item three and four) were reworded so they were more open and generalisable as opposed to simply pertaining to academic concerns, as the purpose of the study was to assess general concerns, e.g. item three 'I worry that my parents will put pressure on me to do well in classes' was reworded to 'I worry that my parents will put pressure on me'. For this reason item four: 'I worry that my peers will put too much pressure on me' was omitted due to overlap with item twelve: 'I worry about feeling peer pressure to do thing I don't want to do'. Items were rated using the four-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: agree, 4: strongly agree) and mean scores calculated (larger scores equating to more Transition Worries).

## 2.4 Procedure

To evaluate the efficacy of TaST, children in intervention and comparison group schools completed an online survey. Prior to completing the survey, ethical approval was obtained from Keele University's School of Psychology Ethics Committee, Head Teacher consent, participant assent and parental opt-in consent was obtained. Prior to data collection all children were read the same information sheet and gave assent. Children who did not wish to participate or their parents had not permitted participation in data collection were given an alternative activity. To prevent demand characteristics or socially desirable answers, the questionnaire's title and sub-headings were deliberately vague, e.g. the *SDQ* section of the questionnaire was presented under the sub-heading 'About me' and teachers were asked to not discuss the research aims with their class. Following data collection, the children were debriefed, offered the opportunity to ask questions and pointed to sources of support. The same procedure was replicated at T2, and T3. Following data collection the research project aims were explained.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Outcome evaluation

Prior to commencing all analyses, the data were screened for errors and missing data. All tests were adequately powered and had good construct reliability. Parametric test assumptions, including normality, homogeneity of variance and outlier assumption testing were met. The only significant outliers identified on box plots were extreme low scores for Coping Efficacy and high scores for Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems and Transition Worries, indicating poorer adjustment and greater vulnerability over the transition period. Outliers were not removed as this has the unwanted effect in the present study of excluding children who are more vulnerable over primary-secondary school transition and find this period more difficult. To control for Type 1 error inflation indicative of conducting four separate tests for each outcome variable (Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries) the Bonferroni correction was applied to the alpha level to set a more stringent level of statistical significance (.0125) and is reported in the findings below.



### 3.1.1 Exploratory analysis

#### Gender differences

Four independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in the four outcome variables across the three time points, combining children in both the intervention and comparison groups. There were no significant gender differences in Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems and Coping Efficacy across all three time points, and for Transition Worries at T2 and T3.

At T1, there were statistically significant gender differences in Transition Worries scores:  $t(303) = 3.51, p < 0.001, d = 0.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.38, -0.11]$  girls reporting greater mean Transition Worries scores ( $M = 2.34, SD = 0.63$ ) than boys ( $M = 2.10, SD = 0.58$ ).

#### Age differences

Four separate one-way between-groups Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted to examine age differences in the four outcome variables across the three time points, for children in both the intervention and comparison group. To do this, the sample was split into four groups dependent on the child's birth month season, e.g. children born in the Autumn months: September, October and November were coded as '1', children born in the Winter months: December, January and February coded as '2', children born in the Spring months: March, April and May coded as '3' and children born in the Summer months: June, July and August coded as '4'. There were no significant age differences at T1, T2 and T3 for Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries. This means that the children's birth month has no effect on the four adjustment outcomes.

### 3.1.2 Baseline comparisons

Four independent samples t-tests were conducted to check differences between the intervention and comparison condition at baseline (T1). As both intervention and comparison groups were matched in terms of the location of the schools, pupil demographics and socioeconomic status, we expected no significant difference between the intervention and comparison group in terms of all four outcome variables.

There were no significant differences in T1 means for Emotional Symptoms and Peer Problems scores. There was a significant difference in Coping Efficacy:  $t(306) = -2.14, p = 0.03, d = 0.14, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.26, -0.01]$  and Transition Worries scores,  $t(307) = 2.80, p = 0.01, d = 0.19, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.06, 0.33]$  between the intervention and comparison conditions at baseline. Children in the intervention condition reported lower Coping Efficacy ( $M = 2.91, SD = 0.61$ ) than children in the comparison condition ( $M = 3.05, SD = 0.52$ ) and greater Transition Worries ( $M = 2.32, SD = 0.66$ ) than children in the comparison condition ( $M = 2.13, SD = 0.5$ ).

#### Difference in attrition

Four independent samples t-tests were conducted to check for difference in attrition in T1 scores for the intervention condition. As shown in Table 2 there was a significant difference in T1 means for all outcome variable scores between the attrited sample and non-attrited sample, in that the attrited sample reported greater Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems and Transition Worries scores and lower Coping Efficacy scores than the non-attrited sample. This suggests that the attrited sample showed higher levels of maladjustment.

**Table 2** T1 Mean, Standard Deviation and t-test scores for outcome variables: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries between the intervention group attrited and non-attrited sample

Outcome variable	N	Means (SD)	$t(df)$	p value
Emotional Symptoms			-3.65 (143)	0.00**
Non-attrited sample	101	0.49 (0.39)		
Attrited sample	44	0.76 (0.46)		
Peer Problems			-2.69 (143)	0.01**
Non-attrited sample	101	0.40 (0.38)		
Attrited sample	44	0.60 (0.50)		
Coping Efficacy			2.97 (143)	0.00*
Non-attrited sample	101	3.00 (0.55)		
Attrited sample	44	2.69 (0.68)		
Transition Worries			-2.09 (143)	0.04*
Non-attrited sample	101	2.25 (0.64)		
Attrited sample	44	2.49 (0.69)		

Note: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ .

### Hypothesis 1: T1-T2 change

As there were baseline differences between the intervention and comparison group at T1, in that the intervention group reported lower Coping Efficacy scores and higher Transition Worries scores, change scores were calculated for each outcome variable, by subtracting each child's T2 score from their score at T1. This means that for outcome variables: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems and Transition Worries, a positive change score would show that the children's scores decrease, meaning a positive outcome. In comparison, for Coping Efficacy, a negative change score would show that children's perceptions in their ability to cope increases meaning a positive outcome. Four independent-samples t-tests were then conducted to compare Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries scores for children in the intervention and comparison conditions.

There were no significant differences in Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries scores for children in the intervention and comparison conditions, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3** Immediate T1-T2 Mean, Standard Deviation and t-test scores for outcome variables: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries

Outcome variable	N	Change score means (SD)	T1 means (SD)	T2 means (SD)	t (df)	p value
Emotional Symptoms					-0.65 (228)	0.52
Intervention	127	0.02 (0.37)	0.57 (0.43)	0.51 (0.45)		
Comparison	103	0.50 (0.36)	0.50 (0.41)	0.43 (0.44)		
Peer Problems					0.45 (228)	0.45
Intervention	127	0.02 (0.42)	0.46 (0.43)	0.39 (0.40)		
Comparison	103	0.06 (0.38)	0.43 (0.34)	0.38 (0.37)		
Coping Efficacy					0.43 (227)	0.43
Intervention	127	-0.01 (0.58)	2.91 (0.61)	2.96 (0.67)		
Comparison	102	0.05 (0.61)	3.05 (0.52)	3.05 (0.63)		
Transition Worries					0.52 (229)	0.52
Intervention	128	0.19 (0.50)	2.32 (0.66)	2.09 (0.70)		
Comparison	103	0.14 (0.57)	2.13 (0.56)	1.95 (0.62)		

Note: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ .

### Hypothesis 2: post-transition change

Due to challenges in collecting data in secondary schools, although children completed a questionnaire in September and December in Year 7, scores at these time points were combined to maximise the sample size. This was done by calculating mean scores for each outcome variable (e.g. (September Emotional Symptoms score + December Emotional Symptoms score) / 2). Where this was not possible, the child's score for the given variable at either time point was used. As a form of simplification, combined September and December scores are referred to as 'T3 Post Transition' scores. Reflecting the differences between the intervention and comparison group at T1, longitudinal, post-transition change scores were calculated. To do this, for each outcome variable the child's T3 Post Transition score was subtracted from their T1 score. Four independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries scores longitudinally, from T1 to T3 Post Transition, between children in the intervention condition and children in the comparison condition.

There were no significant differences in Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems and Coping Efficacy change scores from T1 to T3 Post Transition for children in both the intervention and comparison condition, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4** T3 Post-Transition Mean, Standard Deviation and t-test scores for outcome variables: Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Coping Efficacy and Transition Worries

Outcome variable	N	Change score means (SD)	T1 means (SD)	T3 Post Transition means (SD)	t (df)	p value
Emotional Symptoms					-0.56 (131)	0.58
Intervention	101	0.03 (0.40)	0.48 (0.39)	0.45 (0.40)		
Comparison	32	0.08 (0.47)	0.41 (0.36)	0.33 (0.30)		
Peer Problems					-0.65 (131)	0.52
Intervention	101	0.10 (0.33)	0.39 (0.38)	0.29 (0.31)		
Comparison	32	0.14 (0.33)	0.45 (0.34)	0.31 (0.26)		
Coping Efficacy					-0.92 (128)	0.36
Intervention	100	-0.04 (0.60)	3.01 (0.55)	3.04 (0.60)		
Comparison	30	0.08 (0.58)	3.37 (0.45)	3.31 (0.55)		
Transition Worries					2.63 (123)**	0.01
Intervention	98	0.53 (0.55)	2.24 (0.64)	1.71 (0.59)		
Comparison	27	0.21 (0.63)	1.92 (0.59)	1.71 (0.56)		

Note: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ .



There was a significant difference in Transition Worries change scores between the intervention and comparison conditions at the  $p < 0.01$  level,  $t(123) = 2.63$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ,  $d = 0.32$ , 95% CI [0.08, 0.56], children in the intervention condition having greater mean change scores. In other words, while mean Transition Worries scores decreased for both groups over the transition period, this decrease was significantly larger for children in the intervention condition, who had greater mean change scores ( $M = 0.53$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ) than children in the comparison condition ( $M = 0.21$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ). Furthermore, T3 Post Transition mean Transition Worries scores are equal for both intervention and comparison conditions, despite children in the intervention condition having statistically significant greater Transition Worries scores at T1 (see baseline comparisons above).

### 3.2 Process evaluation

To complement the outcome evaluation findings, process evaluation findings were collected at T2 from children and teachers who participated in TaST to obtain qualitative first-hand insight into how TaST was delivered, what was effective and how the programme could have been improved.

#### 3.2.1 Feedback from teachers

Year 6 teachers delivering TaST were asked to complete a process evaluation feedback form, which contained five structural and process fidelity questions. Out of the four intervention schools, three teachers completed these forms. Overall, it was reported that all five TaST lessons were delivered and most were delivered as planned, although one teacher discussed tailoring the final two lessons to meet the class' first-hand experience. Time allocated to TaST was either as planned, or dependent on time available, some sessions sometimes split into two to aid discussion which children enjoyed and needed longer for. Most teachers felt confident delivering TaST, and felt that the planned, detailed lesson plans and PowerPoint slides helped this. External, personal factors, such as being new to teaching Year 6, also negatively shaped teachers' confidence, which teachers felt would develop with time. All teachers discussed their class being 'very engaged', key features shaping this being the parent activity, the discussion elements and practical tasks.

#### 3.2.2 Feedback from children

The Year 6 children participating in TaST were asked to complete four process evaluation questions. The first process evaluation question was a closed-choice question asking children how useful they found TaST in preparing them for secondary school. 125 children completed this question, of which 60% of children found TaST 'somewhat useful', 32% 'very useful' and 8% 'not very useful', which provides support for TaST as a universal support intervention.

The final three process evaluation questions were open-ended giving the children space to expand on their answer and outline what they liked and disliked about TaST and how it could be improved. Reflecting the descriptive nature of these answers and as the purpose of the present analysis was to obtain a surface-level insight into children's perceptions pertaining to the efficacy of TaST and the spread of responses, inductive content analysis was used taking a data-driven approach to preserve and keep to the data as much as possible [25]. The procedure aligned with the following steps [25], each research question analysed individually: 1) As a data-driven, inductive approach was taken, there was a process of data immersion; 2) The data were broken down into manageable code categories for analysis; 3) The data were then categorised in line with the coding system to create coded units; 4) Revision was implemented if, for instance, a category failed to adequately account for a significant proportion of the data; 5) Following revision, coded units were then recorded using a tally for each code category; 6) Scores for the final coding system are presented in Table 5, Table 6 and Table 7, and dominant responses discussed below.

#### **Write down one thing that you liked about the 'Talking about School Transition' project**

The most popular response to this question was the emotional-centred foci, children discussed how TaST helped them to understand: 'helped us understand the worries about high school' and manage: 'stopped me worrying' their feelings towards secondary school. Children also discussed the usefulness of the emotional-centred reflection and expression components of TaST: 'I wrote down and said things in a fun and understandable way', in helping to manage their concerns: 'it helped me calm down about going to secondary school because I was nervous to start with so it was very useful'.

Discussion of coping skills, was the next most popular response, and children discussed how TaST helped them to manage difficult feelings: 'we learnt how to deal with being scared

and how to think more positively’ and prepare for secondary school: ‘it helped me to be more prepared’ by supporting development of skills, such as confidence: ‘it filled me with confidence’, resilience: ‘how to deal with things’ and coping efficacy: ‘it showed you how to cope in different situations’.

**Table 5** Frequency and percentage of Year 6 intervention children’s responses to each content analysis code category for question two

Code category	Code description	Example of coded units	N	%
Emotional-centred foci	Focus on feelings and emotional-centred reflection	‘it helped us understand the worries about high school’; ‘it stopped me worrying’	24	21%
Coping skills	TaST helping confidence, preparedness and coping	‘it showed you how to cope in different situations’; ‘it filled me with confidence’	19	17%
Transfer exposure	Managing expectations through transfer insight	‘it helped me understand more about high school’	16	14%
Support	Not feeling alone, helping each other	‘it helped me know that I was not alone’	14	12%
Discussion	Being able to talk about transition in class and at home	‘I liked that you could share your feelings to the class’; ‘talking about what we do’	14	12%
Specified activity	Naming of a favourite TaST activity	‘I liked the timetable activity’; ‘the colouring’	14	12%
General appraisal	Expression of liking, disliking or indifference	‘it was okay’; ‘unsure’; ‘good’; ‘nothing’	7	6%
Miscellaneous	Other response	‘the helpful ideas’; ‘I learnt a lot’; ‘that it was exceptionally planned’	6	5%
Total			100	

### Write down one thing that you did not like about the ‘Talking about School Transition’ project

The most popular response was nothing disliked, followed by dislike of a specific activity (most common included the homework, life transition activity and emotions by colour) and specific aspects of the structure and content of TaST that they would have liked to see covered more frequently, such as discussion: ‘I didn’t talk to the teachers as much as I would have liked’. Seven children reported TaST to encourage rumination, in other words, to worry or over-mentalise about their impending transition to secondary school: ‘sometimes talking about it made me more nervous’. Instead children expressed that it would have been better to suppress concerns about primary-secondary school transition: ‘I did not like to be reminded about the change in my life’. This is concerning and it is speculated that some of these concerns may pertain to the way in which TaST was delivered, specifically relating to teacher sensitivity, for example, although teachers were encouraged to create a safe space a child wrote: ‘how I would get told off if I said something wrong’.

**Table 6** Frequency and percentage of Year 6 intervention children’s responses to each content analysis code category for question three

Code category	Code description	Example of coded units	N	%
Nothing disliked	Expression of nothing disliked about TaST	‘nothing I did not like’; ‘what was there not to like’; ‘I liked everything’	31	35%
Specified activity	Naming of a disliked TaST activity	‘homework’; ‘emotions by colours’	13	15%
Structure and content	Structure and content too much (especially writing), or too little	‘it was too long’; ‘too much writing’; ‘it didn’t give advice about moving’	10	11%
School-level factors	Factor related to delivery in a specific primary school	‘it was too early’; ‘I didn’t like how we had to put our names on the booklet’	7	8%
Rumination	TaST encouraging worry and over- thinking/mentalising	‘it made me find new things to worry about’; ‘it scared me a little’	7	8%
Miscellaneous	Other response	‘people took high school way too serious’; ‘childish’	6	7%
Indifference and dislike	One-worded appraisal of general dislike or indifference	‘everything’; ‘I don’t know’	6	7%
Sharing emotions	Did not like sharing emotions in written or spoken form	‘we had to share a lot of our personal worries’	5	6%
Repetition	Material was not new	‘getting told things I already knew’	4	5%
Total			89	

### Write down one suggestion to improve the ‘Talking about School Transition’ project

The most popular response was ‘transfer exposure’. Within this code category, most children discussed the need for specific exposure into the secondary school they would be transitioning to: ‘do one for all of the different schools that people are going to’ and first-hand insight from past transfer children: ‘get some Year 7’s or above to come in and tell us about their experience and maybe have a workshop with them so we can understand the situation more than before’. Four children discussed wanting less exposure: ‘don’t give so many options for children to be worried about’ and preferred suppressing concerns: ‘be more understanding and try to help us to forget about the worries of leaving primary school’.

The next most popular response was ‘no improvement’, followed by ‘miscellaneous’ which included suggestions for further activities, such as ‘a video’ that had no clear pattern and did not fit into the other categories.

**Table 7** Frequency and percentage of Year 6 intervention children's responses to each content analysis code category for question four

Code category	Code description	Example of coded units	N	%
Transfer exposure	More or less insight into transfer challenges	'more advice about high school'; 'talk about the positives instead of the negatives'	25	27%
No improvement	Expression of nothing to improve	'nothing it was great'; 'I can't think of anything to improve'	16	17%
Miscellaneous	Other response	'the helpful ideas'; 'I learnt a lot'; 'that it was exceptionally planned'	12	13%
Individualised support	Personal, individual-level focus, specifically around emotions	'make it more private'; 'could have spoken to the pupil on a more personal level'	11	12%
More discussion	Greater opportunity to talk about transition	'more talking'; 'could make more activities about sharing things with the class'	11	12%
Active learning	More kinesthetic and interactive activities	'make it more active'; 'make it more interactive'	7	8%
Time	Need for greater time to spend on TaST	'having more time'; 'longer to think about your answer'	6	7%
School-level factors	Factor related to delivery in a specific primary school	'got help on the things I struggle with'; 'make sure everyone is involved'	4	4%
Total			92	

## 4 Discussion

In sum, the present research has made a unique contribution to primary-secondary school transition research and practice. Firstly, the present research has raised awareness of the need for emotional-centred support provision over primary-secondary school transition, which to date has been limited [2]. This was shown through the outcome evaluation findings, which advanced theoretical understanding in finding children to report greater Transition Worries prior to the transition to secondary school than in December in Year 7, in addition to the process evaluation findings which demonstrated the unsettling nature of this period and the need for emotional-centred support.

TaST was shown to be effective in providing theoretically informed emotional-centred support intervention to improve children's adjustment (in terms of reducing children's Transition Worries) over primary-secondary school transition, as children in the intervention group showed a greater reduction in Transition Worries from T1 to T3 Post Transition in contrast to the comparison group. Thus, the present research has made a unique contribution to the field by demonstrating the viability and success of implementing a theoretically informed emotional-centred support intervention in practice over primary-secondary school transition, which to date has been limited subject to practical or empirical constraints [8]. As all outcome variables were also theoretically informed by Resilience Theory, the present research has further advanced our understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of adjustment over this period.

As discussed, although data were collected at four time points over the transition period (May and July in Year 6 and September and December in Year 7), due to the limited sample size when attempting to recruit children in secondary school, September and December time point scores were combined. Thus, further research could repeat the present research with a larger sample of children followed over time. For example, despite best efforts to match secondary schools and their feeder primary schools, in the present study we were not able to follow up on a significant number of children post transition (especially children who participated in the comparison condition), which may have impacted our ability to identify additional intervention effects. Indeed, the comparison of the attrited and non-attrited intervention group samples showed that those children who did not take part when at secondary school scored higher for Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems, Transition Worries, and lower for Coping Efficacy, compared to those children we retained. This could have further limited the ability to detect changes since more change is possible (in a positive direction) the more extreme the scores.

Nonetheless, despite the limited sample size, the longitudinal design, which involves the collection of data at several time points spread over the transition year, is a strength of the present research and extends our current understanding of children's adjustment during this time. To date, few school-based transition studies have adopted a longitudinal focus, and instead rely on snapshot designs which is problematic and limits the conclusions that can be drawn by not reflecting the 'whole story' of intervention programmes. In the present research, no significant differences between the intervention and comparison condition were shown immediately following TaST between T1 and T2 when the children were still in Year 6. Taken alone, this suggests that TaST was not effective in improving children's immediate transitional adjustment.

However, taken with the longitudinal findings, it is argued that this lack of change was due to the short time between May and July, in that not much changed in children's lives pertaining to primary-secondary school transition between the two time points to account for significant change in adjustment and difference between the two groups. Furthermore, the children had not transitioned to secondary school at T1 and T2, and thus not been exposed to transfer challenges and the stress associated with this. Thus, children participating in TaST would not have had sufficient opportunity to 'test' their new coping skills. In other words, it is plausible that

there is a germination period in the development and expression of these skills. This is in line with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) [26] Transactional Stress Model which outlines that while emotions, appraisals and self-efficacy pertaining to events facilitate coping, the catalyst for this process is the negative event, which in the present study is the transition from primary to secondary school.

The process evaluation qualitative findings, which were collected while the children were still in Year 6, provide further support for this theory and shed greater light on why change was not shown during this immediate time period. For example, children not only expressed how TaST focussed on variables associated with coping, such as their emotions, appraisals and coping-efficacy, but also discussed how these skills would likely help them when they transitioned to secondary school. Thus, the first-hand qualitative data collected from Year 6 children who participated in TaST is a further strength of the present research, as these findings extend the outcome evaluation findings in aiding our understanding of the process and trajectory of coping and adjustment over primary-secondary school transition. Moreover, this also contributes to increasing awareness of the significance of qualitative methodology in obtaining and valuing first-hand insight from underrepresented stakeholders [27].

The present research also sheds further light on our existing understanding of primary-secondary school transition in demonstrating how some children find this time more difficult than others [13], which is also in line with Resilience Theory. Previous research suggests that this is often because of children's individual differences in their interpretations of risk and protective factors [28], which needs to be investigated in greater detail using more nuanced methods of measurement. In the present study, while there were extreme scores identified in both directions (upper and lower), significant outliers identified on box plots indicated poorer adjustment and greater vulnerability over the transition period. Furthermore, despite best efforts to match intervention and comparison schools in terms of demographics, at baseline, the intervention and comparison group were significantly different in terms of vulnerability, with children in the comparison condition reporting greater Coping Efficacy and fewer Transition Worries in comparison to children in the intervention condition. It is acknowledged that the unmatched baseline was a limitation of the present study, particularly given that some schools expressed a preference to participate in the intervention and may have been in more need of support. Thus, worries may have been unrealistic and specific to those schools and the transition itself showed there was nothing to worry about.

However, children participating in TaST (who had higher baseline Transition Worries scores) essentially caught up with children in the comparison condition (who had lower Transition Worries scores at baseline) following the transition period; thus the present findings also demonstrate the advantages in supporting children on a universal whole-class, inclusive basis. Furthermore, the results also need to be interpreted in light of the possibility of regression to the mean for the intervention group (due to their high baseline scores). Thus, it is also acknowledged that change scores do not fully address the problem of baseline differences.

However, some children may need further targeted support beyond this, and early detection of children who are vulnerable to poor transition and providing them with additional support tailored to their individual needs is likely to minimise maladjustment [29]. Nonetheless, identifying 'at risk' children may be more difficult than initially anticipated. As shown in Bagnall et al.'s (2019) focus group research, primary-secondary school transition has a dual nature, combining both a sense of optimism and anticipation with anxiety and fear. Therefore, there is a need to sensitively measure children's appraisals of optimism and anticipation, in addition to anxiety and fear, as while high scores on both would be expected during this time, solely high scores of anxiety and fear would indicate cause for concern. However, within transition literature, there are significantly more studies focussing on pre-transition experiences, in comparison to research which describes what the actual transition experience is like for children and the impact pre-transition expectations and appraisals have on transitional adjustment. Given that the present process evaluation findings indicate that some children appear at face-value to have fewer worries and are more optimistic about primary-secondary school transition, it would be interesting to shed light on this research gap and assess whether this relates to how prepared these children actually are for the impending move and adjust to secondary school. Using diary-methods in the future could shed light on this understanding.

On one hand, optimistic thinking styles may act as a mechanism for coping [30]. For example, Waters et al.'s (2014) [31] longitudinal research found Australian children who expected a positive transition from primary to secondary school to be more than three times more likely to report an actual positive transition experience. On the other hand, and in line with optimism bias, it is also plausible that over primary-secondary school transition, more optimistic children may also be underestimating transition challenges and ill-prepared by not being worried. However, further research is needed in this area to investigate the trajectory of optimistic thinkers over

primary-secondary school transition using both child self-report and teacher reports. Further research is needed to investigate individual differences, taking into account that children scoring low and high in transition worries may be in need of support.

Extending the above point, supporting 'at risk children' may also be more difficult than initially anticipated. As implied through the qualitative process evaluation findings a 'one size fits all' approach, especially when targeting children's emotional well-being may not be effective for all children. For example, it was shown that for some children the emotional-centred foci of TaST encouraged rumination, in terms of over-mentalising and causing further concern around primary-secondary school transition. This was despite efforts that were made when designing TaST to ensure that emotional-centred content was delivered sensitively, e.g. activities that had the potential to be more sensitive were delivered on an individual basis as opposed to a group or class-basis. Nonetheless, these process evaluation findings are worrying and again raise questions regarding the usefulness of universal emotional-centred support interventions in helping all children in one setting.

The present study is not without limitations, one of which is that outcome measures were assessed using self-report rating scales, albeit all were of established reliability and validity. This can be especially problematic if participants are aware of the research aims and can result in biased responses. However, in the present study efforts were made to avoid children becoming aware of the research aims, such as phrasing TaST sessions as Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) lessons and negatively wording some items on the surveys to encourage children to attend to the question items they were answering. Furthermore, to prevent demand characteristics or socially desirable answers, the questionnaire's title and sub-headings were deliberately vague, and teachers were asked to not discuss the research aims with their class. Moreover, in light of previous research which has found teachers and children to perceive school contexts differently, and utilising multiple-informants to assess the same construct to often show little homogeneity [32], the use of child self-report enabled much needed consideration of child conceptualisations of school adjustment.

Furthermore, the mixed methods design, which enabled participants to both rate and write-down their feelings, recognises the underrepresentation of children's voices within this field and the need to remediate this. Considering Webster-Stratton *et al.*'s [33] recommendation that fidelity measures should be collected at the teacher or school level and outcomes at the child level for appropriate data analysis, in the present study outcomes were measured at the child level and content and process fidelity assessments were obtained from class teachers delivering TaST, and complemented by further process evaluation feedback from children. Nonetheless, it is recognised that obtaining insight from additional informants such as parents and teachers could have also supplemented children's self-reports of their adjustment, but nonetheless was beyond the scope of the present study.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, primary-secondary school transition is a major life event for eleven-year-old children that can have short- and long-term implications on their emotional well-being. Additional emotional-centred support during this time is undoubtedly important, although, as discussed above, is complex and sensitive, and it is recognised that further research is needed to extend the present findings using larger sample sizes and contrast with targeted approaches. TaST, which aligns with an early intervention, preventative approach, extends previous research in this area by illustrating the viability and efficacy of universal, theoretically informed emotional-centred support intervention in Year 6 in significantly reducing transfer children's Transition Worries once at secondary school. Given the low priority and reduction of funding directed to children's mental health services (DfHSC & DfED, 2018) [34], and the stretched time and financial resources schools face to address children's emotional well-being, the present research has immediate implications for our current climate. For example, TaST is cost and time effective, uses minimal resources, can be integrated into the PSHE curriculum and as shown in the qualitative process evaluation findings, is enjoyed and perceived useful by children and teachers.

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